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History: the Life in Language

By LOUIS A. MUINZER

FOREWORD

To some English teachers, historical linguistics is as dead as the 1936 presidential election, the interurban car and the mustache cup. To others, it is as pregnant with horrors as Druids dancing in the moonlight or the Black Mass. To still others, it is simply a dull brute nourished on Gothic verbs, Old English weak adjectives and other irrelevancies. In spite of these varied responses, however, most would agree that not even a Bedlamite in the last throes of paranoia would unleash historical linguistics in a classroom teeming with clean-limbed American youth. In a pair of papers, I wish to submit a minority report on this dead, dire, dull irrelevancy, and to suggest that the lively discipline of historical linguistics belongs in every high school and college classroom where English is taught. The aura of fear and mystery which so often surrounds this subject in the academic mind is due to three basic causes: 1) a misunderstanding of underlying purposes of linguistic history; 2) a lack of familiarity with the non-technical presentations of language history and with the historical reference works; and 3) an imperfect awareness of the value of historical procedures in the English classroom. Behind this trio of causes lies our failure to grant to historical

The intricacies and complexities of historical English grammar and Anglo Saxon have been a challenge (and vexation) to many of us. This paper by Dr. Muinzer, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Illinois, makes it possible for us to place historical linguistics in the secondary curriculum where it belongs and thereby enrich our teaching of English. This research is a refreshing masterpiece of scholarship. You will look forward to a subsequent paper in which Dr. Muinzer gives the implications of principles clarified here.

linguistics its proper place in the curriculum of teacher-training. If the following brief presentation of the subject does nothing more than suggest the seriousness of the gap in our program for prospective teachers, then it will have served a worthwhile purpose.

This paper deals with the first of the three causes of misunderstanding by attempting to define historical linguistics in terms of the general field of linguistic study and then to set forth some of the basic historical principles. To assist in the removal of the second stumbling block, a selective bibliography of helpful and relatively non-technical discussions and reference books has been placed at the end of the discussion. Throughout, I have drawn my illustrative material almost exclusively from the English language, but a chronological portrait of our mother tongue lies beyond the limits of my chosen subject. However, those who wish to have such a sketch in hand as they read these pages may profitably use the admirable digest of English linguistic history found in the introduction to the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary. Fuller presentations are listed in the bibliography.

In the next paper, I hope to describe certain projects in historical linguistics which may provide practical applications of the following material in the high school and college classroom. The use of such projects, of course, depends upon a clear understanding of the underlying principles discussed here.

The Nature and Purpose of Language History

The simple term "linguistics" or "language study" covers a larger area of study than any given textbook or monograph can possibly suggest. When we consider that language is 1) a method of communication, 2) a compendium of sounds and sound combinations, 3) a human invention, and 4) a social activity, we can begin to appreciate how many valid approaches there are to language, and how many individual linguistic facets invite special examination. Before we consider that special kind of language study based upon the historical approach, let us note briefly the various areas into which anyone who calls himself a linguist may delve. The following topics by no means exhaust the study possibilities of the linguist, but they do suggest the range of his legitimate activities.

Working from the simplest to the most complex topics, we may arrange the study areas of linguistics in the following order:

1. *The study of language sounds*, the smallest of our linguistic units. (Phonology)
2. *The study of spellings*. (Orthography)

3. *The study of punctuation.*
4. *The study of words*, which may be approached in a number of ways: their meanings may be studied (*Semantics*); their inflectional forms may be analyzed (*Morphology*); they may be collected, arranged and defined (*Lexicography*). Several inherently historical approaches to words will be added to these later in the paper.
5. *The study of word relationships. (Syntax)*
6. *The study of speech groups within a language.* A dialect, the speech of a special group, may fall into one of two general classes: it may be a *Regional Dialect* (a dialect which arises in a particular geographical area) or a *Social Dialect* (one which arises in a cultural and occupational circle).
7. *The study of usage.* That social dialect which is generally considered the "standard" of effective communication may be the subject of special analysis. The student of usage attempts to understand the norms of standard expression and to act as a linguistic judge in matters of dispute.
8. *The study of language as an instrument of expression.* This area may be broken down into the study of *Rhetoric* (the study of the techniques of effective writing and speaking) and the practice of *Literary Criticism* (the analysis of literature, that variety of art composed of linguistic materials).
9. *The study of language in relation to society.* Such an approach interprets language as a social phenomenon and as an institution molded by and molding civilization.
10. *The study of language in relation to the individual.* Such study attempts to explore the psychological basis of language. This, the newest of the linguistic specialties, is called *Psycholinguistics*.

In the outline above, I have interpreted linguistics in the broadest possible sense of that term. I have done so because I strenuously object to the conception of linguistic science as a limited discipline involving a few basic lines of study like phonology and morphology. The individual may specialize in some particular area of linguistics, but he should never close his eyes to the value and inherent significance of other types of language study. In fact the student who wishes to understand language as a organism must approach it as a vital activity of man, one intimately linked with the personality which gives it birth and with the society in which it is used. A given linguistic investigation, then, may be limited in scope, but the investigator cannot afford to limit his perspective: behind the most minute of specialized studies must lie a response to the immensity of language.

The vast, hydra-headed discipline of linguistics may be validly approached, however, from any one of three directions. Depending upon his choice of direction, the general linguist transforms him-

self into a descriptive, comparative, or historical specialist. For the sake of convenience, we may explore these three specialties by examining in some detail the aims and varied activities of their practitioners.

1. *The Descriptive Linguist* attempts to record and then to classify the features of a language at a given time. Ideally, he may range over the ten kinds of study listed above and compile a complete description of the language, but generally he is more of a specialist. He may concentrate upon morphology and syntax, and produce a descriptive grammar. He may work in the field of lexicography and compile a "collegiate" dictionary. If he is of a more practical nature, he may arrange difficult spellings into useful categories and publish a spelling book for school children. He may take a tape recorder into a boarding house and record the speech of the inmates for phonological analysis.¹ He may collect dialect data in an isolated mountain region or in a certain block in Brooklyn; the data he gathers may be published as a monograph or contributed to a dialect atlas. Or he may even attempt to relate the language of his or some other era to the multifarious activities of its contemporary society. Whatever his activities may be, however, the descriptive linguist is concerned with language at a point in time. His work is like a skillfully taken snapshot, for he has captured a body of linguistic data at a given moment and in a sense "immortalized" it.

2. *The Comparative Linguist* relates languages to one another. Thanks to his brilliant work, we can today understand the family relationship which binds together such vastly different languages as English, Russian and Sanskrit. Generally, a linguist of this type is primarily concerned with phonology, morphology and syntax, but his work does take other interesting forms as well. To the comparative lexicographer we owe our bilingual dictionaries like those for French and English and for Greek and German. The importance of the competent comparative linguist is painfully brought home to the student of English, who realizes that many shortcomings in our conventional grammars are due to pseudo-comparative analysis by erstwhile linguists in the past: because of such muddled work, Latin grammar has been violently forced upon the grammar of English, a vastly different language with its own personal characteristics. The contemporary comparative linguist, conscious of distinguishing differences as well as significant similarities, has provided us with a vast body of valuable scholarship. If the descriptive linguist takes a photograph of a language,

the comparative linguist takes photographs of two or more languages, places the pictures side-by-side, and analyzes their salient features.

3. *The Historical Linguist* is easily characterized now: instead of snapshots, he takes movies. His curiosity is directed not at what a language *is* at a given time, but rather at what *made* it what it is. He is a student of development and continuity in language, however, not of the past *per se*; thus he is something of a prophet, something of an amateur visionary: one of his greatest sources of delight is the unfolding of a new linguistic event which allows him a glimpse of the future. For him, the key word in the vocabulary of language study is a simple French loanword: *Change*. A static description of a language at a single moment of time fails to satisfy him, so he puts together a great many "times" (the frames of his movie film strip), and establishes patterns of motion. He may focus his camera on any aspect of language. He may work out the history of sounds or inflections or word meanings. Turning to lexicography he may produce his own kind of dictionary based on historical principles, tracing forms and meanings from the remote past to the present.² He may chronicle the rise and fall of a regional dialect, or record the impact of a caravan of wars, invasions, reforms, conversions, and inventions upon a language. In a humbler mood, he may simply write the saga of the comma, or trace the spellings of a word.

In the course of his particular researches, the historical linguist adds to the preceding list a few linguistic study areas of his own. To the study of words (No. 4), he adds the study of *Etymology* or word derivation, the tracing of words to their original components, roots and affixes. Also under the heading of word study falls the historical linguist's investigations of vocabulary sources, which involves the cataloging of *Loanwords*, borrowings from foreign languages.³ The language historian must ferret these out in the source materials of the various eras, identify their linguistic origin as closely as possible, and date them. Often, a cluster of loanwords from a given language at a given time reveals vividly the effects of a social upheaval or the advent of the "latest" fad; such considerations take the study of loanwords into the sphere of sociolinguistics (No. 9). Another historical specialty, the study of *Place-Names*, is definitely social in bias; at first thought, names like *Wessex*, *Thames*, and *Madison Avenue* would seem best approached simply as words of a special kind. As studied by specialists in the field, however, place-names are primarily a record of settle-

ment and exodus, and of the coming together of alien peoples. It does not seem too much to say that the study of place-names represents the most fruitful of all the unions of linguistic and social history.⁴ In a similar fashion, the investigation of *Personal Names* can also yield up the secrets of society.⁵

To understand the principles of historical linguistics, however, one must not become too closely involved with the special areas of study: the centrally important fact of this approach to language is the contemplation of change. In the course of such contemplation, the language historian is able to formulate a series of basic generalizations about change which aid him in his more specific research activities. The most important of these generalizations are the following:

1. *Change is a fundamental characteristic of a living language.* A given language can attain a permanent, static form only when it ceases to be written and/or spoken, when it becomes a "dead language." The words dead language will cause many readers to think instantly of Latin, which is frequently described by this phrase. Actually, however, Latin affords an example of a living and hence changing language. Historically speaking, Latin is merely the early form of the Romance Languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Rumanian)⁶ which have developed from the venerable language of the Romans. Furthermore, Latin proper was the international medium of communication throughout the Middle Ages; as such, it displayed many signs of life: syntax was simplified in the prose, for example, and countless words came into the language or altered in meaning. A simple glance at the lexicographical works specifically dealing with Medieval Latin will dispel the common notion that the language was a mere fossil after the days of Roman glory. It cannot even be said that the noble old tongue has stopped wagging and developing in 1960. An investigation of "college diploma Latin" and "commencement exercise oration Latin" would probably discover that the Classics professors who write (or ghost write) most of these dignified texts have hoed the Ciceronian row; in such work, Latin is virtually a corpse, and no one will deny it. The true source of living Latin in our century is the Roman Catholic Church, which still employs Latin as a convenient means of communication. In Catholic Latin prose, the old language of Augustus is as frisky as a spring colt and as changeable as the weather. Virgil would not know what to call the complex instrument upon which I am writing this sentence, but contemporary Latin, with the flexibility of any vital language, refers to the

typographica machina without a moment's hesitation; to create this expression for *typewriter*, modern Latin used a word coined from Greek elements in the Middle Ages (*typographia*) and combined it with the Classical *machina*, which is just about all an ancient Roman would understand if he were to hear the expression. To him a *via ferrea* ("railroad, road of iron") would be a complete mystery, and the *currus* would seem an unlikely object to find on such an implausible highway; he would not know, of course, that *currus* can refer to a railway car as well as to his familiar chariot.⁷ I have used these Latin examples to demonstrate that if people give a language even the most restricted form of life it will change. In fact, it not only will but actually *must* change, if it is to be a means of communication. Individuals change, societies change, time moves on. Language, through intent or accident, moves along with man, society and time. Eleven centuries ago, an Old Englishman translated a timeless passage of poetry:

Weotudlice ond thaeh the ic gonge in midle scuan deathes, ne ondredu
ic yfel, forthon thu mid me erth; gerd thin ond cryc thin hie me
froefrende werun.

The thought was eternal, and the imagery universal, but the language was alive and existed in time. Men spoke that language through a series of wars, social changes, and strange events; six hundred years later, another Englishman sat down to translate the same poem of consolation and the changed, ever-changing words were waiting to be used:

For gif that ich haue gon amiddes of the shadowe of deth, y shal
nought douten iuels, for thou are wyth me; thy discipline and thyn
amendying comforted me.⁸

The world of that fourteenth century writer gave way to the chaos of the fifteenth century and the violent glories of the Renaissance. Another Englishman, taking up the same text, rendered it in a language which seems to defy time, but which nevertheless spoke to changing man:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort
me.

Linguistic change gave to each of these Englishmen an English of his own; an English suited to his time and molded to the contours of his personality. His language expressed *his* world and *his* thoughts, and the lilt in his voice as he spoke it was as much a part of him as the twinkle in his eye or his fear of the devil. It would be wrong, however, to view his language simply as an ex-

pression of his personality, for his English is a time-woven fabric of inspired creativity, accident, and occasional tomfoolery. The English language belongs to no one man, but at a given time a man will find himself reflected in it and it in turn will find itself reflected in the man.

Viewed from a research standpoint, linguistic change is, to be sure, a saddening business: it is a pity that the modern English speaker must struggle with vocabulary and grammar to read *Beowulf* in the English of the Old English era. It is a pity, too, that the English cultural historian finds his primary sources like the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or the charters a far cry linguistically from Churchill's *Memoirs* or the *Congressional Record*. On the other hand such differences teach their own lesson, for they represent the cultural and psychological barriers which separate us from the past. The sentimentalist's view that we are "all brothers under the skin" does not hold true historically. Men, their attitudes, their responses, their social relationships *do* change and change radically. Differences in language, then, mirror the obstacles which we must overcome if we are to understand the civilizations of the past and find their timeless and universal meaning. In the later 17th and earlier 18th centuries, linguistic change oppressed the cultivated mind to such a degree that the proposal to "fix" English in an immutable form was seriously entertained. The well-intentioned proponents of such a scheme did not understand the futility of any project to destroy change.⁹ Their spirit, however, lived on in the Rules of the prescriptive grammar codified by William Ward in 1765 and disseminated up to the present time.¹⁰ The belief that there is an absolute Right Way to use the language implies that new developments—changes—are wrong. The social prestige of such English teaching has undoubtedly acted as a partial check on change, but it has by no means stopped it. We need only point to the development of the progressive passive (*the firewood is being cut*) in the late 18th Century¹¹ and the great flowering of merged verbs (*to put up with, to talk over the matter*) in our own time¹² to illustrate well the inevitable progress of linguistic change. The current, enlightened view of the English teacher as an interpreter of usage rather than as an iron fisted enforcer of the Rules has done much to relax the tension in cultivated English. Change, the very life of a language, moves relentlessly towards the future.

2. *Any and in fact all facets of language change.* As a language develops, change carries it forward on all fronts. Thus, the Old English word *deor* (pronounced roughly like *day-or*)¹³ has changed

in sound and spelling to MnE *deer*: the meaning of the word has also changed, for the word meant "(wild) animal" in OE, not a specific kind of wild animal with antlers. Inflectionally, the possessive singular *deores* has become *deer's* and the form of the indirect object plural, *deorum*, has been lost entirely. Thus, a single word can exhibit four kinds of sound change: phonological, orthographic, semantic and morphological. If we further consider that the general meaning of OE *deor* is now conveyed by the loanwords *animal* (Latin) and *beast* (French),¹⁴ our simple illustration leads us to consider still a fifth kind of change. It would be an easy matter to find changes in syntax (the increasing reliance upon word order), usage (prescriptive avoidance of the OE double negative), *et al.* No aspect of language is exempt from change, and none ever really stops changing, though the rate of development may vary from era to era. In the case of English, the ME period was a period of greatest development, with all facets of our language changing with remarkable rapidity.

In considering change, one must always remember that the various kinds of change neither depend upon one another nor necessarily progress at the same speed: Phonological Change, Morphological Change, Semantic Change lead independent lives. Notwithstanding the comments above, *deer* is a fairly conservative noun morphologically, for it retains its OE uninflected subject-object plural: we still say *the deer were crossing the road*.¹⁵ The shift in the meaning of the word is thus more emphatic than change in form. On the other hand, the verb *help* has changed radically in form (from a strong verb to a weak one) but its OE meaning is still with us. Taking a broader view of these phenomena, we might observe that changes in vocabulary are occurring at a rapid clip while changes in our (highly inexact) spelling system plod sluggishly along.¹⁶

3. *Change in language begins with the linguistic activity of an individual* or with the activity of many individuals responding spontaneously to the same impulses. To begin the study of historical linguistics on the level of societies or epochs is to court misunderstanding. Change begins in the mind and mouth of the solitary human being. Sometimes we can identify a language innovator and write his biography if we so choose. We know, for instance, who created the words *physicist*, *chortle*, and *Kodak*.¹⁷ Characteristically, though, the individual innovator is completely anonymous and we use our imaginations to keep his shadowy image before us. In the next section of this discussion we shall attempt to see precisely how

our old friend "Anon." goes about the business of reshaping language. At the moment, we need merely stress the fact that he does exist.

While "Anon." is a lone wolf linguistically speaking, he is at his potent best when other "Anon.'s" are making the same innovation simultaneously. If *chortle* is the creation of a single man, *geese*, the plural of *goose*, is apparently not. In the period before English was written, individuals presumably tended to make certain internal vowel changes when an *i* or *j* followed the root syllable. The sound changes involved in this procedure follow a certain "error pattern" and would result easily in the everyday speech of the early Angles and Saxons.¹⁸ Clearly, there was no tribal meeting of the settlers of Britain at which *geese* was proclaimed the plural of *goose*. Individuals *working exclusively on their own* produced this form and similar plurals. After the mistake had been perpetrated independently by a great many people, more accurate speakers presumably accepted the new pronunciation and after a time an analogical pattern¹⁹ became established: if *geese* is the plural of *goose*, then *teeth* must be the plural of *tooth*.²⁰

A similar tendency to make spontaneous innovations is often encountered in MnE. Independently many individuals have said *Cavalry* when they intended to say *Calvary*²¹ and many more have said *library* for *library*.²² Many a youngster has said *singed* instead of *sang*, *bringend* instead of *brought*.²³ Such people do not belong to a secret society: they blunder on their own like good rugged individualists. In sum, it would be humanly impossible for a group of people to meet and simultaneously make an innovation in the language. At such an improbable conclave, one person might make such an innovation and the others accept it or modify it, but no concerted linguistic effort could occur.²⁴ To understand how actual changes in speech come about, we must study the individual speaker or writer: in his words lie the potentialities of language development on even its grandest scale.

4. *The inauguration of change* by the individual may be stimulated by a number of forces.

a. *The desire to innovate.* A new word like *physicist* (See note 17) may be consciously *coined* or *borrowed* to fill a gap in the vocabulary. Such gaps are created by social innovations of many kinds: inventions (*airplane, flashlight, television*), religious conversions (*gospel, priest, Positive Thinking*), new fads and fashions (*bloomers, yo-yo*), military activity (*dive-bomber, cannon*). Whatever is new must have its name or it cannot be communi-

cated verbally. In the OE period, such words were characteristically coined from native word elements (e.g. *gospel*, above, and *Thrines* for the Blessed Trinity, "a Three-ness"); beginning in that period, however, the borrowing habit became increasingly important and in the ME and MnE, it has become a dominant feature of the language. A *chef* (French borrowing) is likely to borrow the word *fricassée* rather than create a new native term for the dish. The inventor will probably turn to foreign elements like those in *television* to name his new device, and the columnists will refer to it as *video*. Old native compound habits, however, are very much alive in the new words from OE or well assimilated borrowings: consider *sidecar*, *roadblock*, *bookbag*, *gift-wrapped*, *king size*. In addition to compounding and borrowing, people frequently create spanking new forms which are based on existing word materials (*chortle* from *chuckle* and *snort*) or represent new combinations of sounds (*Kodak*).

Not all conscious innovations, though, are utilitarian. In the course of their day-to-day use, words tend to become stale, and lose their vividness. Their users, thereupon become dissatisfied with them and make changes in their vocabulary. The slang of high school and college students offers countless examples of this tendency, but one case history may stand for them all. A student of mine, in an assignment on word changes, submitted the coined form *poke-slow*²⁵ with the following note: "At Girl Scout Camp, we industrious little campers coined this word. Several of us were continuously late and *slowpoke* didn't seem to carry enough disdain." An examination of a poem by a Gerard Manley Hopkins, or a Wallace Stevens will reward the searcher with many examples of such creative vitality. Poets—like Girl Scouts—desire emotional freshness in their language. Consequently they love to borrow from alien dialects and languages to twist the meaning of a word by placing it in a context and to coin a word which captures their inspiration: when a Stevens calls a man a *minuscule*, when a Hopkins writes of a *wimpled* lip, or (in a lighter vein) when a Lewis Carroll brandishes a *vorpel* blade, vitality triumphs over usefulness.²⁶

The intentional linguistic innovation, alas, is not always an outgrowth of valuable human instincts. Coined terms are often the instruments of racial and religious prejudice, of snobbish group-identification, and of other mortal weaknesses. The only amusing type of innovation under this heading is essentially semantic and involves the pumping of taboo meanings into otherwise innocuous words and phrases. Such words (*Euphemisms*) often involve death

(*to pass away, to cash in one's chips*) and perfectly harmless bodily functions (*to go to the potty, Powder Room, etc., ad nauseum*).²⁷

b. *The nature of sounds.* We here enter into a matter of great complexity, but at least a few words must be said about it. What we call a distinctive sound in a language is actually uttered in a slightly, non-distinctively different fashion by individual speakers.²⁸ Let us, for instance, take the vowel in *sweet*. In OE and ME, this vowel was pronounced almost like the *a* in the modern form *date*. This sound would vary a bit in the speech of individuals, but no one would either care or notice, because the word *sweet* was clearly understood. Suppose, however, that certain individuals independently tended to use a variety of the vowel which was produced a bit "higher" in the mouth. Suppose that this random peculiarity began to penetrate the ears of other people who began to make their own *e*'s in the same way. Suppose that by inching its way along in this fashion the *e* eventually lost its *a* (as in *date*) pronunciation and emerged in the Renaissance as a *distinctly* different vowel. Actually there is no need to suppose, for we have now reached our modern pronunciation of the vowel in *sweet*. Other factors being agreeable, OE and ME long *e* regularly develops into the MnE sound which we have discussed. When we find such a wide-spread development, we are tempted to view that phenomenon as a "Law." It is my belief, however, that the random sound variations of *individual* speakers started a trend which spread throughout a speech community. Such a "regular" development, it must be noted, does not depend upon the influence of related sounds, but upon the latitude of vocal possibilities within the area which we think of as a language sound. Contrast with such a development that involved in the creation of *geese* as the plural of *goose*: in that case, a now-departed *i* influenced the sound of *o*.

Through the study of progressions like that of OE-ME long *e*, historical linguists have been able to work out sets of sound changes of immense significance. The long *e* development is part of a series of vowel changes which transformed the sound of English and added to our spelling difficulties, the orthography of the language being more conservative than our speech. This body of changes (called *The Great Vowel Shift*)²⁹ occurred during the Renaissance and was long in progress. Another set of regular changes had occurred at the "birth" of Primitive Germanic, the ancestor of English; in that case, certain consonants were involved in what are usually termed the *Grimm's Law* and *Verner's Law* developments.³⁰

c. *The personality of the language.* The term is an exceptionally vague one, but the concept is important. There is, for example, a *drum beat* in English which has whittled away on our inflectional endings. For instance, the adjective *good* in an expression like "for the good king" had the early OE inflectional form *godum*; the stress on the basic syllable weakened the inflectional ending in later OE to *godan*; in ME this became (with respelling of the root vowel) *gooden*, then *goode*.³¹ In MnE, the stress of the basic syllable has completely engulfed the inflection, leaving *good*. Another, much later "personality" trait is to be seen in the tendency of post-OE English to borrow a word from another language. Finally, the establishment of patterns to which the elements of a language tend to conform may be mentioned. In MnE, verbs tend to add *-ed* in the past tense and nouns tend to add *-(e)s* in the plural. When we create a new verb or noun, we do so in accord with these patterns. (*Faubused* from the proper noun *Faubus*.³² *Runs* in a baseball game from *to run*).

d. *The impact of external linguistic groups.* Later, we shall consider the influence of one dialect on another. For the moment, let us consider how a foreign language can change the individual's speech, hence ultimately the speech of many people. The most obvious kind of linguistic attack occurs when one language makes a "general attack" on the forms, vocabulary, etc., of another. Such a situation develops when speakers of two languages mingle or live side-by-side. English has twice been thus besieged in its island fortress: first, by the Danish invaders of the OE period and by their Norman-French conquerors in the ME era.

When the Scandinavians settled down in that region called the Danelaw, their English neighbors heard many Norse words, some of them similar to their own. As individuals became familiar with these foreign words, they must have used them unselfconsciously in their own English speech. The Norse pronoun *they* must have appeared very frequently in the casual give-and-take of conversation, for it "caught on" and eventually became Standard English. *Skirt*, *gift* and *law* may represent the kinds of words absorbed by the English from their former enemies.

French, the language of William the Conqueror and his followers, had a similar impact upon English at a later date. Indeed, for sheer intensity, the French onslaught was more violent than that of the Norse; more than any other force, it is responsible for the borrowing habit (or disease) which characterizes the English we know. Yet one looks in vain among the thousands of French borrow-

ings for a single linguistic element as striking as the humble form word *they*. *Beef* and *cattle* and *hotels* are all very well but they speak less eloquently to the historian than our third person pronoun: how vigorously the Scandinavians must have *they-ed* their neighboring Angles to have made such a conquest!

Conquest, however, is not the only method of linguistic attack. Certain languages (rather illogically) gain general social prestige or special prestige in a certain sphere of activity. French still is on the attack in the worlds of fashion (the *chemise* is still a haunting memory), and food (*omelet*, *crêpes suzette*). Italian is active in its impact on musical terminology, and in the Renaissance the prestige of Latin made it a potent force in the world of learning. Again, such bombardments influence the individual who borrows a bit of verbiage which may or may not "catch on."

Sometimes, of course, an English speaker settles in an alien locale, broadens his personal experiences or imports a product from abroad. In such cases, the foreign name may remain attached to the place (*Tanganyika*), experience (*skiing*), or product (*vodka*). Its ability to welcome loanwords with open arms has made English the most cosmopolitan and varied language on the face of the earth.³³

e. *The impact of events*. On November 4, 1957, a young lady in a Champaign-Urbana drugstore dropped a metal container. A person who heard the noise cried out as any of us might have done. In such circumstances, a listener might exclaim *Timber*, *Watch-it*, *Kaplof*, or any one of a number of expressions. Instead, this person uttered *Sputnik!* and placed this little scene at a point in history. At about the same time, a girl blundered forth the identical word when she intended to refer to an innocuous and non-orbiting *Spudnut*. The two instances demonstrate eloquently the impact of an event upon the speech of individuals. In that increasingly remote November the Russian satellite was on the mind of every American; visions of a scientifically peerless United States had dimmed, national pride had been hurt, and yet the imagination was stirred by the Russian achievement. The linguistic activity generated by this event is staggering when one collects it and views it as a historical phenomenon. From *Sputnik* came *Mutnik* and a thousand other *-niks*.³⁴ The language of the rocket and the satellite *blasted off* from the *launching pad* and took its place in the chronicle of English. If we project ourselves back into the more remote past, we shall find that the language has swayed under the impact of many an event. The Danish and Norman invasions, with their

loanword *booty*, may be viewed as such occurrences; so may the flowering of industry and technology in the 19th century; so indeed may the most stirring and far-reaching of events in English history, the coming of Christianity to Kent in 597.³⁵ The effect of Augustine, his monks and his successors upon the language cannot be measured. The subtle alchemy it worked on the meaning of the word *love* would be the subject for a lifetime of semantic research. The strange fate (*wyrd*) which brooded over the Germanic kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England became the Boethean "fortune" which is a manifestation of divine Providence. *Priests* and *altars* came into the range of English experience adorned with the vestments of their Latin names. *Gospel* and *Thrines* were coined. The new religious force which banished old gods to Valhalla became a vital spark in language as well as in the intellects and imaginations of the people. If we could have visited Kent in that remarkable era, we would have found many individuals "uttering history" like the man in the drugstore who called out *Sputnik!* in amused surprise.

f. *Error*. The impact of sheer blunders on the language is a sobering and utterly humbling subject for contemplation. (It is also a very amusing one). The sensitive listener will detect such errors everywhere, chiefly in the speech of those around him, and if he possesses an honest mind as well as a good ear, he will be forced to admit that he is as capable of making a *blooper*³⁶ as the next man. Individual speech lapses (especially if they are spontaneously repeated by many people like *Cavalry* for *Calvary*) may in time become normal features in the language of a social group. As many useful forms have been arrived at by such means, there is no reason to look down one's nose at what passes as folly; many of man's greatest achievements have come about through accident rather than design. Perhaps it is man's genius to stumble blindly up the slope when he cannot march manfully to the summit. In using his language *homo-sapiens* tends (like Ethel Merman) to "do what comes naturally." The results may be riddled with what pass for "mistakes" in the eyes of society, but often the natural and erroneous is an improvement on the respectable and proper. Inspiration and error seem to be brothers under the skin.

A detailed analysis of error types would add an elaborate mass of material. It is sufficient to observe here that common mistakes frequently involve the *Assimilation* of one sound by another (Latin *affinitas* from *ad* + *fin*; MnE borrowing *affinity*), the *Dissimilation* of two like sounds (Latin *peregrinus* became late Latin *pelegrinus*, from which comes our borrowed form *pilgrim*), and the *Metathesis*

of two sounds (OE *acsian* becomes MnE *ask*). Another type of error involves faulty do-it-yourself linguistic analysis, or *Popular Etymology* (American English *bushwhacker* is commonly associated with the business of "whacking bushes," the activity of a backwoodsman; the word, however, comes from the Dutch *boschwachter*, "forest watcher, woodsman."³⁷). Popular Etymology may affect form, meaning, or both.

A particularly significant kind of error is *Analogic Creation*. Analogy is a variety of semi-logical analysis whereby the mind solves linguistic problems. Let us suppose that a speaker wishes to form the plural of *ox*. He may reason: the plural of *box* is *boxes*; therefore, the plural of *ox* is *oxes*. Or suppose that he wishes to use the past tense of *sing*. He may reason that since the past tense of *smile* is *smiled*, the past tense of *sing* is *singed*. In these arguments, the *box* and *smile* forms represent established patterns which the speaker has used to solve his problem. Most English speakers will, of course, know that the historically accurate forms should be *oxen* and *sang*. Nevertheless, children, people of little formal education, and occasionally even literate individuals fall prey to such analogical lapses. As analogy tends to reduce language phenomena to basic patterns, it has had a remarkable effect on the English language. Once, English possessed many nouns of the *ox-oxen* pattern. Today, only *ox* remains of this declension,³⁸ by analogy, its other surviving representatives have been leveled with nouns with an *-s* or *-es* plural. Strong Verbs like *sing-sang* were once more numerous than now, for many of them have become *-ed* (Weak) verbs.³⁹ The effects of analogy on English morphology could not be chronicled in a dozen volumes. Here, it is sufficient to call attention once again to the role of the individual innovator in this linguistic devastation. Even in error, however, English speakers seem to have a sound language instinct. The simple grammar which their foibles have helped create is a remarkable facet of modern English, a monument of mistakes upon which even the greatest poetry can rest secure.⁴⁰

5. *Once change has been inaugurated by an individual (or individuals spontaneously), it may pass through an ever-widening circle of dialect groups until it becomes a feature of the language as a whole; on the other hand, it may stop short at any dialect boundary and go no farther. Let us suppose that a certain Mrs. O'Brien has developed a new and delightful kind of chocolate cookie. In a whimsical moment, she coins the name chookies for these tasty confections.⁴¹ Once, at Sunday dinner, she uses the name as she*

passes a plate of *chookies* to her family. Dad laughs and junior teases her about it. As a joke they begin referring to *chookies* themselves. Soon, the entire family uses the new word. *Chookie* has now become a speech feature of a family's "dialect." Next, Mom tells Mrs. Johnson next door about *chookies*; Mrs. Johnson thereupon asks for the recipe and starts serving *chookies* to her family. By this time, Dad has become so used to calling his wife's masterpiece by the name that he offers a friend at work a *chookie* from his lunch box. Soon, the entire town is eating *chookies*. Another dialect ring has been reached. Next, Mrs. Prim, woman's editor of the local paper, prints the original recipe in her column under the heading: "The Whole Family Will Adore Chookies!" Women all over the county clip out the recipe and spread the gospel of *chookies* over the countryside and to other towns. Conceivably, the new word then spreads from ocean to ocean and is eventually adopted in British households. Thirty years hence, it is a respectable entry in the English dictionaries of the world. At that time, some hungry little boy sitting at the dinner table says to his mother, "Mom, pass those chocolate things, please." Mother—the invincible guardian of her offspring's language—corrects his English with a sweet smile. "Those are called *chookies*, dear." Mrs. O'Brien's casual coinage achieves its ultimate triumph when some well-intentioned etymologist writes a learned article to demonstrate that *chookie* represents a phonetic development found only among Dutch-speaking Indians of the Guineas.⁴²

Having allowed *chookies* its day of glory, we must note that the fanciful (but not at all unusual) progression sketched above might have been halted at any of the numerous dialect frontiers. *Chookie* might have been avoided by the British as an Americanism. Miss Prim might never have used the word in her cookery column, dooming it to local use in Mrs. O'Brien's community. Or perhaps she might have used the word without its attracting notice. Moreover, Mrs. O'Brien might not have mentioned her confections to the lady next door, or that lady might have found *chookies* an irritating term. For that matter, Mr. O'Brien might have exclaimed, "For God's sake, Margaret, quit using those silly words." In that case the invaluable *chookies* would have vanished into the mists of lost verbiage. The odds against a given word going so far in the world would, in fact, be great. Yet, how did *brownie* (American) come into being if not by this process? Or the internationally-known *lady finger* (General English)?

In our hypothetical success story of a particular innovation, we have carried a word through many dialect rings. In an age of mass

communications, the process of acceptance may be dramatically shortened. It is even possible for an innovation to leap from the tongue of an individual into the widest possible usage. Such is the case with Winston Churchill's memorable compound *Iron Curtain*, first used in Sir Winston's commencement address at the University of Missouri in 1946. Reused by journalists in our great newspapers, and employed by commentators on radio newscasts, the term became the most successful coinage of our generation, yielding further fruit in the analogical *Bamboo Curtain*. Such rapid crashes through the dialect barrier are a feature of 20th Century English and should provide much valuable data for future linguists.

6. *The movement of innovations underlies the entire study of dialect.* When innovations are "trapped" in a speech area, that area differs from other speech areas of the language, which are innovating and accepting innovations of their own. As no two areas develop dialect features at the same speed or in precisely the same departments of the language, both a relative conservatism and radicalism may be observed. The major dialect of American English, for example, retains certain features which standard British English has lost, particularly in the realm of pronunciation. On the other hand, our vocabulary on this side of the Atlantic has been anything but conservative!

Whether radical or conservative or both, a dialect is constantly pumping its life-blood, change. It must 1) continue developing as an independent dialect; 2) break through the dialect barriers surrounding it and flood other dialects with its features; 3) allow itself to be engulfed by another dialect; or 4) compromise with another dialect after a hardy struggle. In an era of mass communication and of close social ties between the major English-speaking nations, contemporary English appears to be working its way toward a master, boundary-scorning dialect. Unless some catastrophe or shift of cultural alliances forestalls this natural development, our master dialect should be upon us in the matter of a mere century or two—a short time indeed in the total context of language history. This dialect will undoubtedly represent a compromise (the fourth possibility above), a blend of American and British speech characteristics. The ingredients in the dialect brew will be mingled, but we can be certain that "Americanisms" will be well represented. The result will be a mixed blessing at best, for while unity is a precious possession, so are individuality and independence. Still, though the speech of the Cockney and the Texan may retreat

into the past, the human tongue itself defies standardization. While there is an English language, there will be change, and while there is change, there will be life.⁴³

Notes

1. The most original group of contemporary descriptive linguists, the *Structural Linguists*, makes extensive use of recordings. Every teacher should know the basic work of this "school": C. C. Fries, *The Structure of English* (New York, 1952).

2. See Section IV of the bibliography for the great monuments of this field.

3. There is a distinction to be made between tracing an etymology and identifying a vocabulary source. An etymologist would trace the English word *adjoin* all the way back to Latin *adjungere* and break it down into its components, the prefix *ad* and the simple verb *jungere*. The student of word sources will be primarily interested in identifying the word as a borrowing from Old French. He will look for clues to enable him to spot the immediate source and, if possible, determine the date of entry; in this word, the diphthong *oi* and its pronunciation enable him to do both.

4. The interested reader may refer to the brilliant use of place-name evidence in reconstructing the early English settlements of Britain, by Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, (2nd ed., Oxford, 1947), *passim*.

5. In these idealized sketches, the interdependence of the three linguists is necessarily underplayed. In actual practice, the comparativist may develop his chosen language historically or descriptively. The descriptivist may glance back in time or across the boundary of another language; likewise, the historian may do a rather static description of language at a given time in the past or employ comparative methods in his dialect study. The three perspectives, thus, shift freely.

6. Many of the works in the bibliography provide an outline or diagram of the entire Indo-European language family; e.g., the Merriam-Webster *Collegiate Dictionary*, under "Indo-European languages." The Romance group descends from Vulgar Latin, not directly from the eloquent periods of Cicero.

7. For these words from the *Rituale Romanum*, 1944 edition, I am grateful to Father Joseph Mackowiak of the University of Illinois Newman Club.

8. The Old and Middle English texts of the XXIII Psalm are printed in Rolf Kaiser, ed., *Medieval English* (3rd ed., Berlin, 1958), pp. 70-71. Distinctive Old and Middle English letters have been replaced by modern equivalents.

9. A clear general discussion of the fixers will be found in Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (2nd ed., New York, 1957), p. 314 ff.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 335 ff.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-55.

12. See Arthur G. Kennedy, *Current English*, (Boston, 1935), pp. 297-303; Paul Roberts, *Understanding Grammar* (New York, 1954), pp. 121-22 ("Verb-Adverb Combinations"); Baugh, *op.cit.*, pp. 401-402, and references.

13. In Old English, however, the sounds formed a single syllable. Hereafter, the following abbreviations will be used: OE (Old English),

c. 449-1100); ME (Middle English, 1100-1500); MnE (Modern English, c. 1500-1960). As English displays a continuous development throughout its history, these periods and their dates are a matter of convenience.

14. Many of the words cited in this paper are discussed in one or more of the discussions listed in bibliography sections I, II, III, and VI. The reader is encouraged to use the word indices of these volumes for fuller commentaries. Also, all but the most recent innovations will appear in the appropriate historical dictionaries.

15. A convenient brief discussion of *deer* and other (frequently analogical) plurals of this type will be found in J. N. Hook and E. G. Mathews, *Modern American Grammar and Usage* (New York, 1956), p. 151.

16. Compare, however, the unorthodox spellings in ads and in brand naming, e.g., Corn Chex, Bar-B-Que Snax, Star-Kist Tuna, Soft-Weve (toilet paper, euphemistically called tissue).

17. *Physicist* was coined by William Whewell, who, writing in 1840, also coined *scientist*; both words are discussed in E. H. Sturtevant, *An Introduction to Linguistic Science* (New Haven, 1947), p. 120. *Chortle* appears in Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky." *Kodak* is the strange creation of George Eastman.

18. For the type of error, see assimilation, p. 15. The *i*, a front vowel, has transformed the *o* into a front vowel. Changes of this kind are called *i-umlaut* or *i-mutation* changes. See Baugh, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

19. Analogy is discussed below, p. 16. The relation of analogy to *i-umlaut* and similar changes must remain a matter of speculation, but in my opinion must have played a significant role. The *goose-tooth* analogy is simply a convenient representation of the analogic process involved. The true proposition is the following: if *o* becomes *e* before *i* in a given word (or words), then *o* becomes *e* before *i* in other words. The kind of word (noun, verb, adjective) is immaterial. The reader should distinguish between changes due to the influence of other sounds or analogy, and those changes which occur without external pressure; for the latter, see p. 12: "4b. The nature of sounds."

20. The occasional plural *mongeese* (for the accepted form *mongooses*) represents a belated "analogical umlaut." Such contemporary lapses are based on a pattern established exclusively by the *nouns* retaining their umlauted plurals. Contrast the original "*o* becomes *e* before *i*" pattern cited in n. 19.

21. An example of metathesis; see pp. 15-16.

22. An example of dissimilation; see p. 15. In the case of *libary*, one of two like sounds (the 1st *r*) has not been transformed but totally lost.

23. Both are examples of analogy; see p. 16. The form *brought* is a special kind of Weak Verb past tense; *bringed* merely represents the more usual pattern.

24. Perhaps the closest approach to "group innovation" is found in the "regular" developments discussed in 4b, p. 12. Such changes are not due to conscious effort by a group, but, again, individual speech is the instigator of the "sound drifts" recorded there.

25. Like many coinages, *poke-slow* is based on an error pattern; see metathesis, pp. 15-16. Cp. *Cavalry* for *Calvary*, p. 10.

26. *Minuscule* (from "The Comedian as the Letter C") represents a semantic innovation, as does *wimpled* (from "Morning Midday and Evening Sacrifice"); *vorpal* (from "The Jabberwocky") is another coinage.

27. Consult S. Robertson, *Development of Modern English*, revised by F. G. Cassidy (New York, 1954), pp. 245-250. For yesterdays euphemisms, see J. B. Greenough and G. L. Kitteridge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* (New York, 1901), pp. 300-308.

28. The following discussion is an interpretation of a highly involved, vigorously disputed subject. Regular sound changes have been variously explained and challenged by certain linguists who doubt their absolute regularity. A fuller elaboration of views stated in this paragraph would be based upon the concept of the *Phoneme* and its constituent *Allophones*; see the discussion of these in Sturtevant, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-18. For interpretations of regular change, see Willem L. Graff, *Language and Languages* (New York, 1932) pp. 215-76; Leonard Bloomfield, *Language*, (New York, 1933), pp. 346-368; Louis H. Gray, *Foundations of Language* (New York, 1939), pp. 83-87; William Entwistle, *Aspects of Language* (London, 1953), pp. 34-70; Sturtevant, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-84.—The reader must distinguish between the changes discussed in this paragraph and those which depend upon sound environment or analogy; see note 19 above and the discussion of error types, pp. 15-16.

29. See Baugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 287-89, for a brief description of this shift.

30. For Grimm's and Verner's Laws, see Baugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22; Robertson and Cassidy, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-32.

31. See Samuel Moore, *Historical Outlines of English Sounds and Inflections*, revised by A. H. Marckwardt (Ann Arbor, 1951), p. 89.

32. Collected by one of my students after the Little Rock incident; an excellent example of the impact of events on language. See below, 4.e., pp. 14-15.

33. For loanwords in English, see the various historical studies in Part II of the Bibliography. Baugh's treatment is particularly comprehensive.

34. *Sputnik* words will be examined in my forthcoming paper on historical linguistics in the classroom.

35. See Baugh, *op. cit.*, p. 94 ff.

36. An example of a successful contemporary coinage. *Blooper* was apparently coined by the T.V. producer Kermit Schafer; see his collection of radio and television lapses, *Pardon My Blooper*, (Crest Books, Greenwich, Conn., 1959). This book provides many interesting and typical instances of linguistic error.

37. So the *New World Dictionary*, "bushwacker." It is interesting to note that the other two collegiate dictionaries (Merriam-Webster and *American College Dictionary*) fail to note this derivation. Harold Whitehall's splendid etymological work in the *New World* makes it generally superior to its excellent competitors as an aid to the language historian.

38. *Children* does not historically belong to the "ox-declension;" its "proper" plural ending is preserved in the *r* of the contemporary form; to this, a *second* plural ending — that found in *oxen* — has been added. Historically, *children* is as redundant as *bookses* or *shoeses*.

39. A convenient discussion of the movement of Strong Verbs to the Weak Verb class is found in Baugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-97 and 299.

40. The above paragraphs only introduce this matter of error in language. Many interesting kinds of error have not been mentioned. For further information see the classic treatment by E. H. Sturtevant, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-122, and also Robertson and Cassidy, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-85.

41. Cp. *chortle*, a similar "blend" of two words. Such words are discussed frequently by linguists, e.g., Sturtevant, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-12.

42. The study of word origins and vocabulary sources is often capricious. The investigator should always check what one "authority" says against the views of others. See Robertson and Cassidy, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-77.

43. For further discussion of dialectology, see the works cited in note 28. For the American dialects, see the bibliography, Part III, and Baugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 406-63. Many "Americanisms," incidentally, stem from British dialect forms.

Historical Linguistics—an Introductory Bibliography

The following works are standard authorities on the matters treated. They represent those volumes which I should recommend for one wishing to build up a knowledge of historical linguistics on relatively simple but secure foundations. Other popular treatments might be added to these titles, but I have always held that a short reading list is more enticing than a long and involved one. Those wishing to investigate further will find ample references in Baugh, and in Robertson and Cassidy, to keep them busy.

I. General treatments of language containing material on historical linguistics.

Bloomfield, Leonard, *Language*, New York, 1933. (A linguistic masterpiece; more difficult than Sturtevant.)

Sapir, Edward, *Language*, Harvest Books (paperback), N.Y., 1955. (Brief and stimulating.)

Sturtevant, Edgar H., *An Introduction to Linguistic Science*, New Haven, 1947; paperback reprint, 1960. (An excellent brief account; a good starting point.)

II. The history of the English Language

Baugh, Albert C., *A History of the English Language*, N.Y., 2nd ed., 1957. (A detailed but not unduly technical account, strong on social backgrounds. Contains a comprehensive treatment of loan-words and a discussion of American English.)

Jespersen, Otto, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Anchor Books (paperback), Garden City, N.Y., 1955. (A stimulating and imaginative brief presentation by one of the greatest students of English.)

Moore, Samuel, revised by A. H. Marckwardt, *Historical Outlines of English Sounds and Inflections*, Ann Arbor, 1951. (May be used for its paradigms of changing forms and for its record of sound changes. The beginner should not attempt to master this material.)

Potter, Simeon, *Our Language*, Penguin Books (paperback), Harmondsworth, England, 1950. (Another brief treatment notable for its compression and range.)

Robertson, Stuart, revised by F. G. Cassidy, *The Development of Modern English*, N.Y., 1954. (A mine of delightful and informative lore.)

III. American English.

Marckwardt, Albert H., *American English*, Oxford University Press (paperback), N.Y., 1958. (Good brief historical account.)

Pyles, Thomas, *Words and Ways of American English*, N.Y., 1952. (Delightful writing combined with good scholarship.)

IV. Historical Dictionaries. The following works trace word form and meaning, giving numerous dated quotations. After protracted study, the investigator will make use of other historical dictionaries, but these are the fundamental works.

Craigie, Sir William, and James R. Hulbert, eds., *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, 4 vols., Chicago, 1938-44.

Mathews, Milford M., *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, 2 vols., Chicago, 1951.

Murray, James A. H. et al., eds., *The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 12 vols. and supplement, Oxford, 1884-1928. (The finest dictionary in the world. Also called *The Oxford English Dictionary*.)

V. Phonetics. A treatment of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) will prove helpful. The conscientious student of language should learn the IPA symbols and acquire a knowledge of the classification of language sounds. A convenient treatment is

Whitehall, Harold, "Modern American English pronunciation," *New World Dictionary*, pp. xv-xxi. A table of IPA symbols appears on p. x.

The discussion in Robertson and Cassidy, pp. 52-76, is also good.

VI. Other readings.

Greenough, James B., and George Lyman Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, New York, 1901. (An excellent, readable presentation of semantics and other aspects of word study. That many of the discussed words have developed radically since this book was written adds to its interest.)

Hook, J. N., and E. G. Mathews, *Modern American Grammar and Usage*, N.Y., 1956. (Brings historical linguistics to bear upon descriptive grammar. A sound presentation.)

Myers, Edward D., *The Foundations of English*, N.Y., 1940. (A detailed but well-directed guide to the languages which have influenced English; contains chapters on the history of the language, meaning, etc. The individual who works his way seriously through this volume will find it very rewarding.)

